DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 553 CE 044 610

AUTHOR Navaratnam, K. K.
TITLE Social Competence and Inservice Training Needs of Village Level Extension Agents in Sri Lanka.
PUB DATE 17 May 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at Scholars Forum on International Development (Blacksburg, VA, May 17, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Developing Nations; *Educational Needs; *Extension Agents; Extension Education; Foreign Countries; *Inservice Education; *Interpersonal Competence; Needs Assessment; Postsecondary Education; Program Improvement; *Rural Areas; Rural Education
IDENTIFIERS *Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

Multidisciplinary training in social competence is of vital importance for service-oriented workers who have direct linkage with baseline citizens. Extension workers should be aware of the nature and characteristics of social science tools and be able to apply them in their daily activities. The following six competencies have been identified as necessary for extension workers: confidence, empathy, autonomy, judgment, creativity, and intelligence. Existing programs for training village-level extension agents cover a variety of subjects in technical areas in agriculture; however, the curriculum lacks emphasis on the development of social competencies. Such training is especially needed at the village level since nearly 60 percent of the village population are peasant farmers. Village-level extension agents must have a thorough understanding of the complex hierarchy of village society. Instruction for agents should be provided both in class and under field conditions through such techniques as group discussion, panels, field visits, camping, and on-site demonstrations. Improving the physical, economic, social, and cultural environment in which extension workers live and interact; participating in social and cultural activities; and maintaining functional relationships with other social institutions are additional ways through which social competence could be developed among village-level extension workers who have direct and immediate links with their clients. (MN)

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SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND INSERVICE TRAINING NEEDS OF VILLAGE LEVEL EXTENSION AGENTS IN SRI LANKA

K.K.Navaratnam
Agricultural Education
121 Lane Hall, VPI & SU
Blacksburg, Va 24061

Paper presented at scholars forum on international development held on May, 17, 1985, Donaldson Brown Continuing education center, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia.

CE046610

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SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND INSERVICE TRAINING NEEDS OF VILLAGE LEVEL EXTENSION AGENTS IN SRI LANKA

The extension service spends considerable money and manpower in recruiting extension agents to assist for people with various socioeconomic background and living styles. Every year, hundreds of extension agents enter into the extension service with their basic preservice and induction training mainly in technical areas. These newly employed extension agents will need to acquire social competence for effective functioning at the local level. The technical component of their training does not provide an opportunity for the development of social competence needed for successful extension work at the local level. The acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in social aspects is possible through formal and informal learning experiences.

Inservice Training

Michalak and Yager (1979) refer to training as any organized effort at behavior change needed for specific occupations in human capital development oriented areas. Accordingly, the training component facilitates human capital and personality development. Pettman's (1973) theory of human capital investment says

> the basic concept of human capital is that, like a machine, a trained person is produced by the application of productive resources to a pre-existing substance and the manifestations of this application are firstly an increased capacity to produce which secondly leads to an increase in value of the service rendered. Because of the temporal

> aspects of the training process and the benefits derived, the value of resources used in training can therefore be considered as investment and the increase in earning resulting from such training can be treated as its yields. (p.42)

Thus, economic and social growth among people, especially among villagers, can be created with properly trained extension agents.

The training component consists of preservice and inservice training. Preservice training refers to the professional training received prior to appointment in a particular work. The inservice training includes all forms of training for professional personnel during their period of employment. An inservice training program is equally as important as a preservice training program. It is impossible to provide all needed behavioral knowledge through the preservice training. There is no professional development process without inservice training. Inservice training can provide not only technical competence but also social competence especially for service oriented personnel such as extension agents, volunteers, and social workers.

Social Competence

The concept of social competence is inherent in the idea of training of social or service oriented workers. However, in many instances, the concept of social competence has been given less attention due to the higher level of concentration on developing technical competencies. The term competence often is used as synonym for ability because ability pertains to interpersonal competence involved in controlling the outcomes of episodes of interaction. Siporin's (1975) perception of social concept is

> as a capacity to interact with one's environment, to have influence on the environment, and to interact cooperatively with others so as to achieve life tasks and goals. (p.85)

Wiegand (1979) described social competence as the capacity of a person to engage his full range of abilities appropriately in interaction with and by influencing his environment and the people in it in such a way as to achieve life tasks and goals fairly.

Essence of Social Competence

We, as innovators, have the dream that one day we would be able to see service oriented personnel who will be able to apply social competence in their daily work in addition to technical competencies. That is, trainers hope that service oriented personnel would be able to use the analytical tools of social sciences to help them understand the nature and causes of individuals and their need in addition to the social problems, and to make more thoughtful decisions as a member of society. It is true that many training programs considered incorporating the social competence but the actual considerations given are not very substantial. Today, the international aid agencies and development consultants are rediscovering the roles of social competence as a tool of socioeconomic development in third world countries. Based on my personal observation, I found that at a time when social competence was imperative to a free society and even to survival of many development programs in developing countries, aid agencies and consultants concentrated on development of technical competencies at the expense of social competencies. They neglected their duty of speaking on behalf of preparing trainees to develop social competencies.

Eventually, those training concepts and methodologies pulled trainees to stand on their own bootstraps for needed social competencies. Both national and international agencies for social and economic development must open up opportunities to incorporate the components of social competencies as their aid packages for developing countries. If change agents further delay speaking for social competence, already existing antagonism of present training concepts will spread and increase, thus endangering the existence of the training institutions of many agencies.

Multi-disciplinary training in social competence is of vital importance for service oriented workers who have direct linkage with base line citizens. The workers should be aware of the nature and characteristics of social science tools. They should be able to apply these analytical tools in their daily activities. The social competencies are one of the major pillars on which effective services can be geared towards felt needs of clients. All service oriented personnel including future personnel should get acquainted with the social science tools through training, especially through inservice training activities. Thus, inservice training programs should offer frontier thinking of the content of social competencies. Trainees of each institution should be up-to-date with the changing roles of society for whom services are targeted. The time is now to launch dialogue on social competencies with office personnel, field workers, aid agencies, and the societies.

Components of Social Compentencies

Foote and Cottrell (1955) have identified six distinctive components or categories of competencies which are basic in the gamut of abilities manifested in service oriented workers. It consists of confidence, autonomy, empathy, judgement, creativity, and intelligence. The explanatory definitions of the components of social competencies are as follows:

Confidence - is the ability to maintain hope in the face of frustrations and setbacks and to cope with everyday work difficulties with no sign of disorganization or immobilization.

Empathy - is the ability to correctly interpret attitudes and intentions of others, to perceive situations from other's stand point, and thus to anticipate and predict their behavior. This type of social sensitivity rests on what we call the emphatic responses. The emphatic responses are basic to 'taking the roles of the others' and hence to social interaction and communicative processes upon which rests social integration.

Autonomy - is the clarity of the individual's conception of self, the extent to which he/she maintains a stable set of internal standards by which he/she acts; the degree to which he/she is self-directed and self-controlled in his/her actions; his/her confidence in and reliance upon himself/herself; the degree of self-respect he/she maintains; and the capacity for recognizing a real threat to self and of

mobilizing realistic defenses when so threatened. That is, autonomy is taken to be genuine self-government, construed as an ability, not a state of affairs.

Judgement - is the ability which develops slowly in human beings to estimate and evaluate the meaning and consequences to self of alternative lines of conduct. It means the ability to adjudicate among values, or to make correct decisions; it is an acquired critical ability differing in degree among individuals.

Creativity - is the demonstrated capacity for innovations in behavior or real reconstruction of any aspect of social environment. It involves the ability to develop fresh perspectives from which to view all accepted routines and to make novel combinations of ideas and objects and so define new goals, endowing old ones with fresh meaning, and inventing means for their realization. Among other things it seems to involve curiosity, self-confidence, something of the venturesomeness and risk-taking tendencies of the explorer, a flexible mind with the kind of freedom which permits the orientation of spontaneous play.

Intelligence - is the scope of perception of relationship among events, the capacity to abstract and symbolize experiences, to manipulate the symbols into meaningful generalizations, and to be articulate in communication; skill in mobilizing the resources of environment and experience in the services of a variety of goals.

The above mentioned components of the competence will reflect the ability of a person engaged in a service oriented activity. I believe that the understanding of these social competencies will lead workers to a thinking, feeling, decision making, communicating, and acting process in their work. All service oriented workers should be equipped with social competence in order to understand their working profile, clients, subculture of clients, socialization, sense of commitment, motivation, values, and norms of clients and finally to understand the process of learning.

Training of Village Level Extension Agents in Sri Lanka

The Agriculture Department, one of the agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture Development and Research, is the principal institution carrying out agricultural extension work. The organizational structure of agricultural extension consists of four levels mainly: national, district, agricultural service center, and village level. Many personnel are responsible for extension activities at each level. The Sri Lankan extension agents who work directly with farmers at the village level are called 'Village Level extension Agent.' The education and training division of the Department of Agriculture is a supportive system for extension activities throughout the country. The education and training division conducts preservice, induction, and inservice training programs for village level extension agents who are graduate of the School of Agriculture.

The School of Agriculture, preservice training institute, is offering a two year diploma course in general agriculture. At present, there are five Regional Training Centers that provide inservice training and facilities for extension personnel. The curriculum of the School of Agriculture includes the following courses in the two year diploma training program:

FIRST YEAR COURSES

- Agricultural Chemistry
- Agricultural Botany
- Animal Husbandry - I
- Horticulture - I
- Crop Science - I
- Agricultural Engineering - I
- Work Shop - I
- Home Economics - I

SECOND YEAR COURSES

- Animal Husbandry - II
- Horticulture - II
- Crop Science - II
- Agricultural Engineering - II
- Work Shop - II
- Home Economics - II
- Plant Protection
- Extension Education Principles
- Farm Management

The courses included in the curriculum of the two year diploma training in general agriculture shows a lack of emphasis on social science courses and therefore a lack of initial training on concept of social science tool. The inservice training activities cover a variety of subject matter in technical areas in agriculture which are important at a particular time. The above mentioned analysis clearly shows a lack of emphasis is given in the development of social competencies of village level extension agents.

Moreover, the nature of the Sri Lanka's peasant farming system is also another supportive factor to demonstrate the need for social competence of extension workers. Nearly 60% of the population who resides in rural Sri Lanka are involved in peasant farming. Peasant farming is characterized by small holdings where farmers cultivate rice, subsidiary food crops, and field crops. The bulk of the labor force, management, and capital needed for the peasant farming comes from the same household or family production unit. The peasant farmers have many problems such as lack of capital, lack of managerial skill, and limited organizational activities. The social structure and its hierarchy is more complex and there are many variations among farming groups in terms of their beliefs, habits, and social functions based on caste and social standing. This complex nature of the peasant farming society demands that village level extension agents develop social competencies in addition to technical competencies needed for their work. The above discussions lead me to build an inservice training model to provide social competence for village level extension agents in Sri Lanka.

An Inservice Training Model

Social competencies are characterized as one of the main aspects in learning process. If extension agents are expected to gain social competencies through their learning process, the learning opportunities and their methodologies must be broadened to include social science tools in their learning process. Although many educators and trainers spoke of the necessity of social competencies of extension agents, very few of them did much about implementing their conviction in classes, mainly because of lack of trained personnel in the social science areas in the extension service. Social work educators have succeeded to varying degrees in the effort to implement the social science tools in the learning process. In 1972, Williams developed a package to improve creative learning by identifying a wide range of modes to help students to learn about social science tools. Thus, it is evident that needed learning modes can be developed to provide social competence education for village level extension agents.

The learning modes can be developed through need assessment on social competencies. The social need can be divided into four categories such as nominative needs, felt needs, expressive needs, and comparative needs (Bradshaw, 1972). Even though social needs assessment is inherent to methodological problems, the needs assessment should be given priority in developing learning experiences in social competencies. Bergivin (1967) has pointed out that an effective program of adult education should consider the needs and related interests of adult learner and attempt to discover and meet the learner's real needs as well as the needs of the social order.

In the needs assessment strategy, needs of the workers must be identified before the nature and content of learning experiences are determined. It follows that the identification of such needs is the all important first step in program building for learning activities. A diagnostic procedure of one kind or another must be employed to determine the needs of workers. Basically, identification of the present level of social competence and the needed or desired level of social competence of workers, and thereby determining the gap, is one of the best ways to assess the social needs. Based on the existing gap in social competence, learning objectives for inservice training can be developed. The learning objectives are the baseline for outlining contents and learning activities or learning experiences for needed social competence. Also, objectives are the key elements in evaluating the outcomes of the learning process.

As represented in figure 1, the needs oriented social training model could be used to provide social competence for the village level extension agents. The model consists of the following steps:

1. Making an accurate as possible identification of needed social competence.
2. Formulating attainable objectives.
3. Identifying and developing learning experiences.
4. Provide informal and formal learning opportunities.
5. Evaluating the learning outcomes.

Useful learning objectives for staff training and development must reflect that which staff members need to know and do in order to be effective and efficient in the performance of their tasks in extension

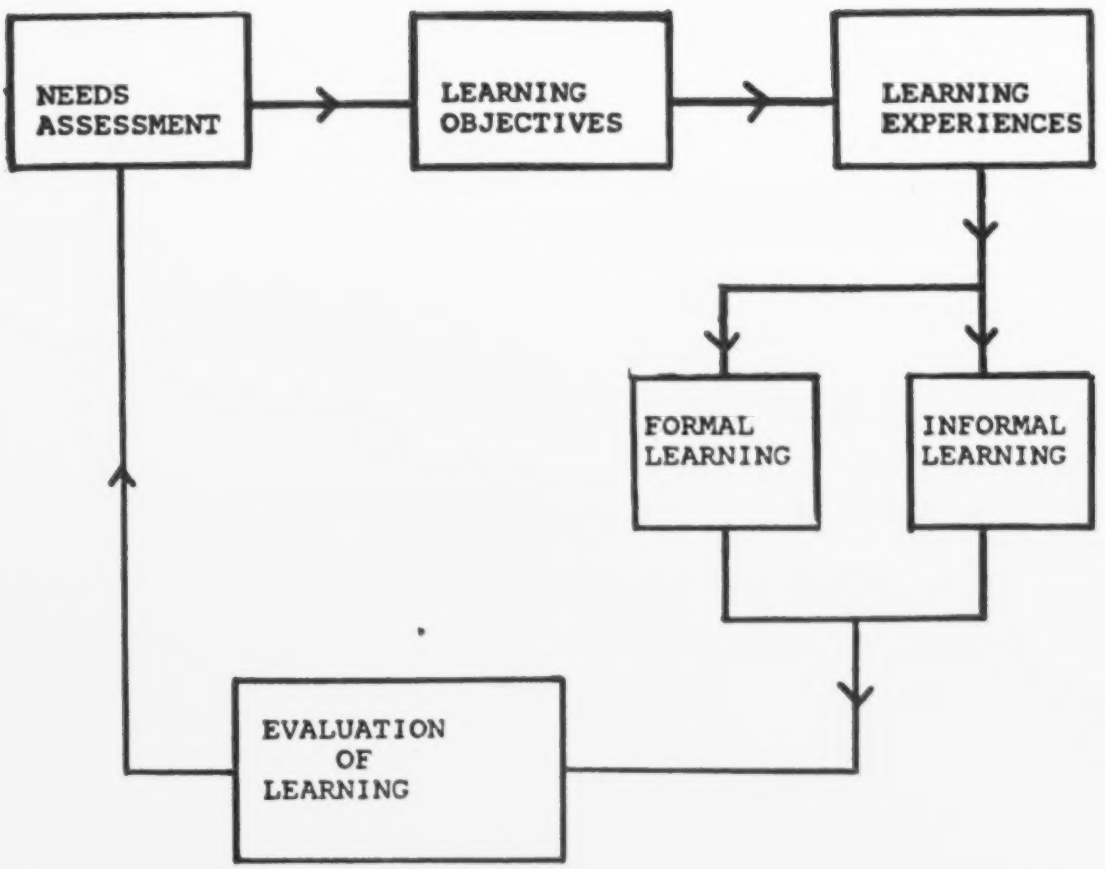

Figure 1: An Inservice Training Model

work. An analysis of the preservice training program curriculum of village level extension agents and observational and conversational on site experiences suggest that the social competence of village level extension agents needs to build through preplanned preservice and inservice training activities.

Conclusion

Social and technical competencies are not only necessary, but also must be required conditions for all extension agents to be competent in the performance of job responsibilities and to gain job satisfaction. Social competencies such as confidence, intelligence, autonomy, empathy, judgement, and creativity should be inherent in the process of deriving objectives for staff training and these competencies must be used by extension agents as a means for relating clients to the sociological aspects of the world of work in which they earn, live, and enjoy their work. Extension agents must have a thorough understanding of society. The organization in which they are employed should offer educational experiences which are timely and appropriate in helping people make desirable changes in themselves and within society.

Social competence should be provided through both in-class and field conditions, such as 'social laboratories.' The technique such as group discussion, panel, field visits, camping, and, demonstration could be used to provide on-site learning experiences. The formal technical training is not enough to produce capable extension agents for the society. Improving the physical, economic, social, and cultural environment in which extension workers and farmers live and interact,

participating in social and cultural activities, conducting and contributing in organized seminars, workshops, and maintaining functional relationship with other social institutions are additional ways through which social competence could be developed among village level extension workers who have the direct and immediate link with their clients.

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